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## Review of *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* by Donald J. Pisani

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**To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902.**  
Donald J. Pisani. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1992.  
xx + 487 pp. Maps, photos, references, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 cloth  
\$19.95 paper.

Writers of western history often assume that the West is a unified region,  
and thus impose a regional story on what is in fact a dynamically diverse area.

Donald Pisani's study carefully avoids this pitfall. Viewing the West as a "fragmented" region, divided by geographic variety, economic competition, and local and state political jealousies, he underscores the region's numerous and very real divisions. His study, which is a thoroughly documented work of major importance in the field of water policy history, thus transcends his particular topic and offers an important insight into western history in general.

Pisani focuses on public water policy in the West between 1848 and 1902. Beginning with a general discussion of the decentralized nature of American politics, Pisani turns first to the problems of defining who should benefit from water laws during the California gold rush. The author then shifts his attention to attempts to reform water laws and policy for individuals, private corporations, and various levels of publicly controlled irrigation projects. Driving Pisani's understanding of water policy are both the varieties of problems to which water solutions could be applied, and the even larger number of competing irrigation advocates demanding their own social, economic, or political payoffs. The culmination of the study, the passage of the Reclamation Act of 1902, is portrayed as neither the results triumph of years of mature experimentation, nor a radical departure from traditional western individualism. Rather, Pisani demonstrates that westerners "had learned to cooperate in matters of mutual concern," but "also reflected persistent suspicions and irreconcilable differences" (p. xvii). The divided West remained fragmented, with troubling consequences for the twentieth century.

Pisani proves his masterful understanding of water law and offers a wealth of examples. Dozens of irrigation plans, most of them never getting beyond the level of theories or proposals, are discussed in concise detail. Pisani also places the development of western water policy in a national framework, showing how the passage of the Reclamation Act was related to national issues such as the 1893 depression, fears over the assimilation of "new" immigrants from southeastern Europe, and anxieties raised over the future of rural life in the face of rapid industrialization and urbanization. This is an important element too often lacking from studies that focus on western history. His portrayal of the various sides engaged in water policy debates is thoughtful yet impartial. Traditional water policy heroes, such as John Wesley Powell, lose some of their brilliance, while "villains" acquire a more sympathetic role, and men who had previously been mere footnotes, such as the showman and speculator "Buffalo Bill" Cody and the lawyer and publicist George H. Maxwell, become more important players. This is all very refreshing in a study on Western water management, where few historians have approached the topic in a nonpartisan manner.

Though the author claims in the introduction to be writing a narrative history, the book is far more analytical. Furthermore, the fragmentation that is at the heart of Pisani's thesis, the numerous detailed irrigation proposals, and his determination to deal in an even-handed manner with all proponents engaged in the policy debates at times leaves the reader wondering where the narrative thread has gone. Yet this bewilderment is in part what Pisani is attempting to show; that the fragmented nature of the West produced a vast confusion of competing plans that had no generally agreed upon, overarching direction. Far from a traditional (or even "New West") morality play of good guys versus bad guys, Pisani presents a complex struggle between real people. In other words, this is historical analysis at its finest.

Pisani's book shows the fragmentary nature of the West as the key obstacle to the development of a rational, comprehensive regional resource management policy. While his focus is on water, his message should be extended to other aspects of Western history as well. His conclusions should be carefully considered by anyone hoping to understand "Western" issues. **Mark A. Eifler**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska at Kearney*.